

Waukegan News Sun, August 1, 2005

Lake County's two congressional representatives hailed a measure adopted Thursday in the House and Friday in the Senate permanently banning oil drilling in the Great Lakes.

The Senate passed the mammoth Energy Bill legislation with broad bipartisan support, 74-26, ending years of congressional stalemate over energy. It will funnel billions of dollars to energy companies, including tax breaks and loan guarantees for new nuclear power plants, clean coal technology and wind energy.

U.S. Reps. Mark Kirk, R-Highland Park, and Melissa Bean, D-Barrington, both opposed the original House version of the new Energy Policy Act because it didn't include the ban.

Both Kirk and Bean joined a bipartisan coalition of Great Lakes legislators to introduce the ban.

The legislation states: "No federal or state permit or lease shall be issued for new oil and gas slant, directional or offshore drilling in or under one or more of the Great Lakes."

"The Great Lakes supply 25 percent of the nation's drinking water," Kirk said. "All of this could be erased by a huge oil spill or natural gas fire from a drilling platform. We must protect our most precious freshwater resource and I'm glad this legislation permanently bans drilling in the Great Lakes."

"The cleanliness of Lake Michigan is one of my highest priorities," Bean said. "Given the continued and growing demand on the Great Lakes as a resource for drinking water, commerce and recreation, it is essential that we protect them."

The Senate version of the bill that went to the House did include such a ban, along with incentives not included in the first House bill, including tax credits for hybrid cars and a prohibition on drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Kirk said.

Nevertheless, the Energy Bill has been strongly criticized by some environmental groups, who said the bill does nothing to reduce the high cost of energy, especially at the gasoline pumps, and will not reduce the country's heavy reliance on oil imports. Its supporters maintained that in the long-term it will refocus the country's energy priorities and promote cleaner energy and more conservation.

"The bill ... is a simply stunning display of congressional indifference to our serious energy problems and an example of corporate welfare at its worst," said Joan Claybrook, president of Citizen Action.

"It does nothing to ease prices for gasoline or electricity for consumers, does not address climate change and utterly fails to chart a course toward a more energy-efficient, cleaner future for America," she said.

"This bill is not perfect," Kirk said. "But it lays the groundwork for developing renewable energy sources and promoting conservation. Hybrid and fuel cell technology is our future if we are ever to lessen our dependence on foreign oil. I'm glad this bill provides incentives for both."

The House approved the measure in a 275-156 vote. Besides Bean, four Illinois Democrats, U.S. Reps. Dan Lipinski, Jerry Costello, Bobby Rush and Lane Evans, joined the nine-member Illinois Republican delegation in voting for the bill.

Kirk said oil and gas have been produced from the Great Lakes for 26 years and that there currently are seven producing wells. The wells, some on the Michigan side of Lake Michigan, "have produced enough natural gas to fuel the U.S. for nine hours and enough crude oil to fuel the U.S. for 35 minutes."

Five or six wells are under Lake Michigan. All are land-based directional drills that reach under the lake.

Five of the eight states bordering the Great Lakes, Michigan, Wisconsin, Illinois, Ohio and New York, ban drilling and Ohio's ban is temporary. Indiana, Minnesota and Pennsylvania do not. The federal ban will now trump the Indiana, Pennsylvania and Minnesota laws, Kirk said.

For consumers, the bill would provide tax credits for buying gas-electric cars, make energy improvements in new and existing homes, and beginning in 2007 extend daylight-saving time by one month to save energy.

The bill's price tag — \$12.3 billion over 10 years — is twice what the White House originally had put forward and raised caution among some senators.